

# Dealing with the Age-Old Issue of Fear



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**W**ithout a doubt, fear is on every gymnastics coach's top five list of most frustrating coaching issues. It can drive you to drink, beat your head against the chalk box, or consider coaching soccer (I can't ever recall being afraid to dribble and score).

The nature of the beast is that our sport is scary... plain and simple! Athletes quickly learn that landing on your head hurts, straddling the beam leaves ugly marks, and slamming your shins into the bar or table has a tendency to stop rotation. Fear is inevitable in gymnastics.

If coaches can grasp the foreign idea that fear is actually the friend of the gymnast, perhaps patience in dealing with the periodic problem will be easier to offer. Fear keeps things real. It fosters consistent effort and focus. Actually, we all probably use fear as a motivator more often than we would care to admit. How many times have you warned an athlete "you're going to get hurt if you don't try harder, concentrate, or focus?"

Bridling fear is the key. Teaching kids how to control the fear is an art that some gymnastics coaches simply miss the boat on. From experience I can tell you that regardless of how infantile you may think the fear issue is -- the fear is real to the gymnast. I hear the term "irrational fear" all the time. It may be irrational to YOU, but to the athlete the notions of crashing, bruising, scraping are not irrational thoughts.

The short cut method of dealing with fear is to punish the athlete into submission .... "stay on beam until you finish," "come back after practice," yell and scream at them, ridicule and humiliate them (as I write this blog, I have a faint recollection of a coach using these tactics long ago and, coincidentally, he resembled the likeness of ME. Many say I've mellowed over the years, I say I've just gotten smarter). Short term tactics don't solve the problem and, in fact, just create others like fear of the coach, hating gymnastics, hating practice, enforcing bad habits, lowering self-image etc..

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If I had to condense dealing with fear into an all-encompassing solution here is how I would start:

- Know what the fear is. Have the gymnast verbalize her particular issue.
- Let the gymnast know that fear is OK, as long as there are efforts to overcome it.
- Set the guidelines of acceptable behavior. No crying, no standing shaking in her boots, no lying about requirements, etc.
- Make the gymnast comfortable and assure her that you are there to assist her with her problem.
- Have the gymnast give input to the solution. Ask what she needs to take the appropriate steps to progress. (5 back walkovers on the floor line, 5 on the low beam with mats, 25 with a double\spot, etc.) You, of course, accept her ideas or offer a compromise ... how about 5 with a single spot.)
- Set a time line contract for advancing. “Okay, this week we will stay on the floor and low beam, next week the medium beam with a pad, and the following week high beam with a spot.”
- As a coach, it’s important to look in the mirror and ask “What can I do better? Or what could I have done better? Many fears are the result of moving too fast with progressions, progressing beyond the physical or mental abilities of the gymnast, or technical imperfections that lead to problems and therefore a lack of confidence.

As a coach you need to:

- Check the lead-ups for the skill(s) in question. Can they break the skill down into smaller components with success?
- Floor drills are very important. Isn’t it ridiculous to ask a kid to do something on beam that she struggles with on the floor?
- Check the physical abilities. Are they strong enough? Can they achieve the required shapes as an isolated element?
- Check your progressions. Did you allow enough time to master confidence in less intimidating training situations, i.e. with spotted skills, padded skills, line drill basics, etc.?
- Check your attitude in dealing with fear. Do you show anger, frustration, lack of patience? This could be adding to the stress level for the gymnast.
- Check the technique. Little things like alignment, head position, eye focal points, etc.
- Perhaps outside mental coaching is needed. There are many great sports psychologists that work wonders with the bridling of fear.

As a final thought: When in doubt, back up a step or two and fix any technical problems. Even if the technique seems fine, reviewing the basic lead-ups to reinforce the gymnast’s confidence never hurts. Often times the toughest issues have the simplest answers. Such is the case when dealing with fear. ✘